OBITUARIES

Robert E. Treuhaft Dies at 89; Civil Rights Activist, Attorney

Los Angeles Times

Robert E. Treuhaft, 89, a civil rights activist and lawyer whose long-standing criticism of the funeral industry helped develop his wife Jessica Mitford's scathing, best-selling book, "The American Way of Death," died Nov. 11 in New York. The cause of death was not reported.

Mr. Treuhaft belonged to and served as attorney to the Communist Party of the U.S.A. for many years. He made a habit of defending groups ranging from the Black Panther Party to Vietnam War draft resisters to members of the Berkeley, Calif., Free Speech Movement.

He was a New York native and Harvard University law school graduate. He went on to work for the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s. Later, his intellectual but funny parrying with members of the House Committee on Un-American Activities in their Communist-hunting hearings of the 1950s became legendary. He took a certain pride in the committee's listing him as one of the most "dangerously subversive" lawyers in the country.

During World War II, Mr. Treuhaft worked in the legal department of the Office of Price Administration in Washington. There, he met the British-born Jessica Mitford, by then a war widow and single mother of a young daughter.

Smitten by Mitford, Mr. Treuhaft pursued her and, when she transferred to the San Francisco office, he followed. They married in Santa Rosa, Calif., in 1943. She died in 1996.

The two were both known for their wit as well as intelligence and social consciousness, and they often attributed their long and happy marriage to a shared sense of fun along with their mutual political views and civil rights goals.

Their home in Oakland, Calif., was for years a San Francisco area salon for the discussion of international politics and literature.

The couple resigned from the Communist Party in 1958, shortly after Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev conceded Josef Stalin's murderous record as head of the Soviet Union. Mr. Treuhaft said the information about Stalin, whom they had idealized, came as a "staggering blow."

Mr. Treuhaft, who established a law practice in Oakland, served on the board of the Consumers Cooperative of Berkeley and was a founding director of the Bay Area Funeral Society. He used knowledge gained through that role to criticize undertakers for their lax self-regulation and price-gouging.

His research, coupled with that of his wife who had become a muckraking journalist, led to publication of her landmark 1963 expose of the funeral industry, "The American Way of Death."

The book, witty and startling in its revelations, remained on best-seller lists for nearly a year and revolutionized thinking about funerals, burials and cremations.

In 1976, California Gov. Jerry Brown (D) appointed Mr. Treuhaft to the state Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers, where he used the position to continue working for reform.

Mr. Treuhaft helped research other books by Mitford, and, after her death, completed her last, "The American Way of Death Revisited." He also was assisting with a book of Mitford's letters still to be published.

Survivors include a son and a stepdaughter.